

Frederick Melo, *Pioneer Press*

In the early 1880s, the Union Depot became the center of St. Paul's transit infrastructure. Freight and passenger rail lines soon linked St. Paul to Chicago and destinations across the Midwest. By the mid-1900s, the rebuilt depot had grown to accommodate more than 280 trains and 20,000 passengers per day.

Some consider that ancient history. Others, a sign of things to come.

On Tuesday afternoon, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, Ramsey County Commissioner Jim McDonough and a packed tent of public officials broke ground on the renovation of a new Union Depot - heralded as a future hub for St. Paul's burgeoning "multimodal" public transit system.

"It's a great day to celebrate," said state Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, who chaired the House Capital Investment Committee at a critical time for securing state and federal funding for the project.

Moments later, an orange excavator dug into a series of old Postal Service loading bays, ripping out giant chunks of wall to make room for what will become an elevated train deck and passenger loading platform off Kellogg Boulevard, near St. Paul's Lowertown neighborhood.

The ceremony's mood was festive and congratulatory. By 2030, the Union Depot could serve as many as 3.8 million riders annually via Amtrak, Greyhound and Jefferson bus lines, Metro Transit, the Central Corridor light-rail line to downtown Minneapolis and - some hope - high-speed rail lines.

The renovation project is expected to create 3,000 jobs - about half of them in the depressed building trades.

It carries a price tag of as much as \$243 million, cobbled together from local, state and federal sources. Major work is expected to take less than two years.

In speeches, officials said regions connected to other communities by transit will be better positioned to hold their own.

"We cannot compete against the Chinas and the South Koreas and others all over this globe unless we're willing to invest" in infrastructure, Coleman told the crowd.

The depot's transit functions will take up half of the 185,000-square-foot station, leaving plenty of room for innovation. Proposals have called for retail space, a public marketplace and rotating installations by local artists.

Passenger service from the depot ended in 1971 when Amtrak moved to St. Paul's Midway area. It's expected to return once construction is complete. In 2007, the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority board voted to buy the depot concourse and adjacent land from the Postal Service and breathe life into the station.

In September, Ramsey County commissioners approved a \$148.8 million construction contract with Mortenson Construction, which is working with HGA Architects and Engineers, as well as URS, a transportation and engineering design firm.

Using the depot as its St. Paul terminus, the \$957 million Central Corridor light-rail line being built between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul is scheduled to begin operation in 2014. The light-rail trains will stop at their own station, to be built on the south side of Fourth Street in front of the depot, and not in the depot building itself.

But, the federal government has not signed off on a formal agreement to fund the Central Corridor line.

The outlook from at least one Washington official seems hopeful. Therese W. McMillan, a deputy administrator with the Federal Transit Administration, said she is looking forward to how the neighborhoods surrounding the depot develop. She urged the Twin Cities to advocate for

federal money with firm plans in mind.

"The regions that get their priorities straight and speak with one voice stand the best chance" of having their transit funding needs met, she said.

That includes wishes for high-speed rail. McCollum, D-Minn., called the hub a way to connect the Twin Cities to the rest of the Midwest through transit.

But skeptics question whether a high-speed rail line from St. Paul to Chicago will materialize in the current political climate. The November elections elevated a Republican majority to the U.S. House and Minnesota Legislature and removed from office U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Minn., a pivotal supporter of high-speed rail who had been the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

New Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker campaigned on a platform of killing a proposed high-speed line connecting Madison to Milwaukee, and the Obama administration quickly pulled \$810 million in rail funding from Wisconsin after the election.

But even if the line has to sidestep Wisconsin, "high-speed rail to Chicago will be coming someday," McDonough promised the crowd.

"It will be incremental," he said later, in a brief interview as the excavator continued to eat through the Postal Service truck bays. "Our next step will be trying to add a second train during the day" to Chicago on Amtrak's Empire Builder route.